DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 119 215 CS 202 546

AUTHOR Cowan, Elizabeth
TITLE Teaching Communication Skills: The Community College as Model.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (45th, Atlanta, Georgia, November 6-8, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Communication Skills; *Community Colleges; Community Education; Educational Change; *Educational Philosophy; *English Curriculum; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Models

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the community college English curriculum as a model for teaching communication skills in four year colleges and universities. The first part of the paper examines and discusses the decline of English majors, the changing nature of college students, open-admissions, part-time students, adult enrollment, and the difficulty graduates are having finding jobs. The second part of the paper discusses the philosophy of the community college and the three distinct divisions of the community college: the division designed to provide the first two years of baccalaureate study; the career education division, designed offering community interest courses. Community colleges have much experience in dealing with students of all abilities, as well as part-time and adult students. It is concluded that student bodies at universities and community colleges are beginning to resemble each other and that community college English departments have valuable experience in areas universities must begin to explore. (TS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED119215

Elizabeth Cowan

Teaching Communication Skills: The Community College as Model.

There is a strange occurrence abroad in the land. You can find it at the University of Florida in Gainsville and at City College in New York. It has happened at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and will at U.T. Austin come January. The occurrence is the hiring of community college faculty members by prestigious colleges and universities to instruct graduate students and faculty alike.

Several factors come together to create the complex situation which sends the university English department outside its own walls to seek specialized expertise. With the decline of English majors all across the country, more and more members of the university department are required to pick up introductory courses to make their loads. Two examples: Yale reports that while in 1969-70 no senior faculty taught freshman courses, 10 now do; at Washington University, Dick Ruland reports, the current trend is for more and more full-time faculty to participate in freshman offerings. For many, these courses are such new terrain that the entire department stumbles in the frustration caused by competent people being thrust into areas for which their specialties have not prepared them.

This situation is complicated further by a second factor--the markedly changed characteristics of college students of the '70's, a change that makes instruction a challenge for new and old faculty alike. The "new students," as they have been labeled, are extremely practical, often disparaging anything which does not seem to promise immediate applicability to vocational interests. They are not persuaded by the arguments that held our students in the past and demand proof of the importance of our subject. And they see little value in our subject. When ACE asked all

CS 202 546

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Elizabeth Cowan

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

entering freshmen in 1973 what they planned to study in college, 21% said business; 12%, engineering; 8%, technical fields. Only 1% said they wished to study English.[1] And there are no signs that the percentage is increasing.

In addition, the new student may well be an open-admissions student. Although open admissions is not new by any means, it is true that the actual recruitment of such students, coupled with the decline in the number of regular college clientele choosing to attend school, increases the proportion of "irregular college material" which we must work into the fabric of the university. Contrary to popular opinion, these open-admissions students are not preponderately from minority groups. Over fifty percent of them are daughters and sons of white, blue-collar workers, often representing the first generation in their family to go to college.[2]

Perhaps the most pervasive characteristic of these "new students" is their past record in school, particularly in academic subjects. Usually coming from the lower fifty percent of their high school class, these students are immobilized by fear of failure, are passive in learning situations, lack interest in intellectual pursuits, and share in substantial numbers the authoritarian values of Middle America. All of these characteristics make their education a particular problem for the university English department.[3]

It is apparent, then, that the university is, in many cases, having difficulty teaching the students who are there; but if enrollments continue to drop, they are not even going to have those students. Realizing that

it will take only twelve years to feel the effects of the drop in first-grade enrollments (a drop which has been 600,000 every year since '73)[4] and realizing that its share of the present college population is decreasing in most nonrequired courses, the university English department recognizes that if it is to maintain itself at anything like its present size, it must draw a new population. And this poses a particular problem. For the new pool for drawing is the part-time student.

You probably noticed the headline article in the Chronicle earlier this fall lauding the 3.9 percent increase in college enrollment. The most significant sentence in the article, however, appeared mid-way in the second column. It read, "About two-thirds of the additional students this fall are expected to be enrolled on a part-time basis."[5] While full-time attendance increased approximately 6% during the past 2 years, part-time enrollment grew 39%,[6] with part-time students now making up over 50% of the college population.[7] This might not be so important a point were it not for the decided differences between part-time and full-time students and how these differences affect the English department. Part-time students, like "new students," are much more vocationally inclined, wanting to know "how to do things--as opposed to how to think about things."[8] They are older and have a different claim on education than the nineteen-year-old. (Forty-nine percent of all persons now in college are over 21, and ten percent are over 35).[9] These adult part-time learners, when asked to state their educational aims, list first the improvement of their professional skills and learning daily living skills. Their second priority is courses to foster personal development. The last priority:

study of the humanities and fine arts. At the very bottom of the list of preferences are the "basic academic tools, social, biological and physical sciences and the English language."[10]

The implications of these priorities, added to the unprecedented growth in part-time and adult enrollment, are staggering to the university department. (In 1973-74 alone, for instance, the college-going population over 21 increased 81%.) "It really will not matter how many new students come to college if they are part-time and/or adults with little interest in the humanities as we teach them and with practically no interest in taking courses taught as background for professional roles in the disciplines. When the academic subjects are taught in order to solve problems, however (say, biology translated into ecology or sociology into urban studies), the part-time and adult populations are very interested."[12] They are not interested in courses taught as foundation blocks for further study. The university English department has the enormous task of discovering how to present its subject in a way that will draw from this impressive number of potential students without losing the integrity of the discipline.

I know that at this point I should supply some comic relief, not describe additional problems leading the university English department to seek outside help. But two other conditions should be cited. One is the increasing responsibility the department is feeling for providing literacy for all college students, and the other is the unemployability of the department's graduate students. Both are causing sleepless nights and in themselves would be reason enough for the department to turn anywhere it could for advice and assistance.

All across the nation the teaching of writing and reading are claiming the attention of university departments, in part because that is where the bulk of the teaching is now done, in part because that is where the finger of accountability from other departments, the administration, and the public points first, and in part because those subjects, always the backbone financially of the department, are now receiving the professional respect that our myopia did not always allow in the past. Ready to accord the teaching of writing a place of importance in department offerings, faculty members are realizing that they, as a whole, are not abreast of the research in the field, do not know the scholarship in the area, and have, because of the demands of their individual concentrations, never been able to study the mass of critical theory on the subject. A faculty development program with experienced consultants at its center, then, is a boon to such a department.

Finally, spurring the seeking of assistance from outside is the department's difficulty in placing its graduate students. With 206 definite job openings in the October MLA Job List[13] and with over 1,000 Ph.D.'s in English expected to graduate this June[14] (and we can only guess how many MA's), with over 55% of the unemployed last spring indicating they had no prospects for a teaching position,[15] a department is wise to find out from whatever source it can what training will increase its graduates' employability.

At this point I think I understand the action of the old timer in Honey in the Horn who cut his own salary from $1.50 to $1.00 a day because fractions made his head hurt. Faced with challenges such as these, a

department, tired at the end of a long day, might say, "Let it go. It is better to shrink than to have to deal with problems like that." Fortunately, though, we are never that tired, and when the sun comes up the next day we are back examining the situation for new clues and possibilities. And it is just this search that is leading the university to the community college.

Which is certainly a surprisingly turn of events.

And a very understandable one.

For the community college has experience that, if shared, will save the university from having to reinvent the wheel. An examination of the typical community college English department will illustrate the similarities between the challenges there and those now facing the university.

The community college movement began with a very broad mission, to provide education for all people in the community according to the needs of that specific community. This meant that early community colleges faced the problem of providing whatever education its clientele needed and/or wanted. The solution was a structure for the college of three distinct divisions--for all practical purposes three colleges within a college: the transfer division, designed to provide the first two years of baccalaureate study; the "technology" or career education division, designed to teach students specific vocational skills and place them in jobs at the end of two years; and the continuing education division, which gave degree and non-degree credit, offered community interest courses, and, in effect, provided any educational experience needed or desired by the community.

Serving all three of these programs simultaneously was the community college English department, hoping to maintain the integrity of its discipline at the same time that it designed courses for all three divisions of the college. The demands were great. While the department taught survey of of sophomore literature, aiming for the same standards as its neighboring university, it also taught composition at the police academy and the detective story in the continuing education division. From the very beginning the department had to justify its existence in a very practical and provable way, often in the face of strong distrust, even disdain, from certain areas of the college which saw little if any value in the liberal arts. The kind of flexibility required to be able to hold simultaneously to the good of all peoples in the college demanded that the definition of "English" be very broad. Balancing on the thin edge between this necessary flexibility and the ideals of the discipline itself--and finding a way to keep the work of such a department from degenerating into merely a service to every one else instead of holding an importance in its own right--did produce an English department with many stories to tell and hard times to record. And it is to profit from such experience as this that a school like the University of Florida each year hires on its graduate staff a community college professional to teach students and faculty alike.

In still another way community college faculty members are providing valuable information for the university departments where they are teaching. They have much experience in dealing with students of all abilities. In fact, in a recent survey of desirable skills needed by community college teachers, one getting high priority was "the ability to walk on water."[16]

Nathan Glazer, head of AACJC, often remarks on the unbelievable demands on the community college faculty. He put it this way; "[They must] learn how to teach, keep up in [their] field, study sub-cultures, and change [their] attitudes toward students and the academic process."[17] One of the indisputable facts of life for community college teachers is that while they teach a high proportion of very capable students, they also teach large numbers of low achievers, and usually in the same class. Finding a way to bring these nontraditional students into the mainstream of college education has been and continues to be, therefore, a task with highest priority in community colleges. Although in many ways they still have much to learn, community college English departments have at least tried a host of remedies, which sometimes do and sometimes do not work, and they can discuss the multiplicity of ways their efforts have changed their educational philosophy and their concepts of good teaching.

Community college English departments, too, have concentrated on finding ways to teach the skills of literacy (a concentration, for example, which brought a member of the faculty in the remedial education division of Forest Park Community College to the graduate staff of City College in New York). They have searched for ways to teach writing successfully, in some cases making such changes as providing a series of freshman English electives rather than the traditional one-shape course. (This adaptation, by the way, is also present in the university: at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a student has six types of freshman English from which to choose; all freshmen at the University of Cincinnati choose electives as some part of their year of study.) Community colleges were

required to work with standard and nonstandard speech long before it was fashionable to do so. They have already tried and discarded many approaches to remediation, have refined the systems they now have and, in general, have learned the necessity of tailoring the teaching of literacy to their variety of students.

In still another area the community colleges provide valuable experience for the university. They dealt early with the part-time and adult student. One of the first accommodations was in time and place requirements. If there were enough clerks at the bank wanting Advanced Business Writing or enough members of the Creative Arts Guild wanting Introduction to Fiction, or if the third-shift supervisors at the local textile plant needed English Composition at 9:00 p.m. instead of the usual morning hour, then the community college English department accommodated them. If the lawyers in the community wanted a Shakespeare course designed with their specialty in mind, then the department offered Shakespeare and His Legal World. (Again, working to find that thin-edge balance between the educationally defensible and the ridiculous. We have all seen courses which fall perilously close to Woody Allen's parody of a few years ago in which he designed a course called "Yeats and Hygiene, A Comparative Study: The poetry of William Butler Yeats is analyzed against a background of proper dental care.")[18] Perhaps the accommodation was something as simple as presenting traditional courses in nontraditional packages--a course in the novels of Cooper, Hemingway, and Faulkner might become "Literature of Hunting and Fishing." A sophomore course in the Bildungsroman might be re-designed as "The Initiation Rite in Literature."

In other words, the community college department, by necessity, has become an expert in pragmatism. In describing the contribution of community college teachers to the success of the University of Michigan's DA program, Dan Fader remarks on this quality; "Our greatest difficulty in creating a useful program for training and retraining experienced teachers was with ourselves. . . . It was our own training that stood most persistently in our way."[19] And from community college teachers, he goes on to say, they learned pragmatism. "[As a result of the community college teachers present in the program] we are entirely interested in what works and have only an experimental rather than a moral interest in what should work. Our value judgments are based invariably on what is learned rather than what is taught."[20] This pragmatism, illustrated in observable forms, not just in theory, the community college can share with the university.

The important point in all this is that the community college English department has most valuable experience which the university is beginning to turn to its own advantage. The student bodies at both schools are beginning to resemble each other significantly--high and low achievers, full-time and part-time students, degree- and nondegree-seekers, idealists and pragmatists, young and old. And, surprisingly enough, so are the pragmatic philosophies. The diversified programs at several important universities--Michigan State with its three-pronged emphases in the undergraduate curriculum, the University of Virginia with its new Ph.D. in Language, Literature, and Pedagogy, Texas A & M's proposed communications option--capture the same spirit: meeting the challenge with new programs,

redesigned courses, and restructured classes. With the success record the community college has--growing from 300,000 in 1957 to 1,750,000 in 1974,[21] expecting an enrollment increase in the next eight years of 19 percent while universities have been told to anticipate an 18% decline,[22] already teaching over 40% of all entering college students,[23] --one is inclined to ask respectfully what they are doing right. I suspect we will find the answer squarely placed in their balance of idealism and pragmatism, a philosophy which may well be their greatest legacy to higher education. We could do worse than to follow such a model.

1 Alexander Astin, et al., The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1973 (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1973).

2 K. Patricia Cross, The Research Reporter, VI, 4 (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), p. 2.

3 Ibid., p. 3.

4 Fred M. Hechinger, "Education's 'New Majority,'" Saturday Review, 20 September 1975, p. 15.

5 Chronicle of Higher Education, X, 20 (18 August 1971), p. 1.

6 Spectator (Washington: National University Extension Association, June 1975), p. 17.

7 Letter from Judith Schub, National University Extension Association, August 1975.

8 K. Patricia Cross, "The New Learners," Change, 5, No. 1 (1973), p. 33.

9 Spectator, p. 17.

10 Cross, "The New Learners," p. 33.

11 Spectator, p. 17.

12 Cross, "The New Learners," p. 33.

13 MLA Job Information List, English Edition (October 1975), p. i.

14 Based on estimates of surveys taken 1973-75 by the Office of the Director of English Programs, Modern Language Association.

15 Letter to the Editor, ADE Bulletin, 44 (February 1975), p. 38.

16 Robert McCabe and Cynthia M. Smith, "New Programs and Practices and Desirable Faculty Compentencies and Attitudes," Graduate Education and Community Colleges: Cooperative Approaches to Community College Staff Development, 5 (Washington: National Board on Graduate Education, August 1975), p. 12.

17 Ibid.

18 Hechinger, p. 16.

19 Daniel Fader, "The University of Michigan: A New Degree Program to Prepare Teachers of English," Graduate Education and Community Colleges: Cooperative Approaches to Community College Staff Development, 5 (Washington: National Board on Graduate Education, August 1975), p. 46.

20 Ibid., pp. 43-44.

21 Allan M. Cartter and Maurice M. Salter, "Two-Year College Faculty and Enrollment Projections," Graduate Education and Community Colleges (August 1975), p. 36.

22 Ibid., p. 33.

23 Ibid.